Marantz PMD620

The age of affordable, professional hand-held flash recorders is upon us. As surely as the Pro-Walkman recorder followed personal cassette players, so the prevalence of affordable MP3 players was always likely to translate into recording devices. ROB JAMES explores.

When any new machine comes my way I follow the old dictum: 'When all else fails, read the manual', to get a decent insight into just how good a job the designers have made of producing an intuitive user interface. In the case of the PMD620 (UK£379 + VAT) the answer is, 'remarkably good.' It is set up for recording in MP3 from the internal mics, which means you can be recording ten seconds after opening the box. Bung in a couple of alkaline AA batteries, flip and hold the power switch to turn it on and press Record. It really is that simple.

The machine arrives with a dinky little in-line mains power supply, wrist strap and a mic stand cradle/belt clip. I would like to have seen a means of securing the PMD in this. There are two mounting point options for the wrist strap, top and bottom. Only a little larger and heavier than a packet of cigarettes, the recorder will fit into most hands comfortably. Unusually, it seems best suited to left-handed use for interviews and news gathering. The Record button falls naturally under your thumb and Pause and Stop are in easy reach. Although the display is a little small and monochrome it is an OLED and bright and pin-sharp. All controls are either recessed or semi-recessed giving a smooth feel in the hand which also minimises inadvertent button presses.

Construction is mostly plastic with radiused sides and a champagne grey brushed metallic front panel. One minor problem arises from this. At some angles to the current light source the white printed legends merge totally into the background, especially on the curved edges. However, the controls are so simple and intuitive that anyone using the PMD620 regularly will have no problems. Some very subtle little rubber inserts on the back afford a bit of acoustic isolation when the machine is placed on a surface, however, these bumpers are so shallow it will need to be a very flat surface.

I tried using the PMD620 with just the internal mics for recording voice and attempted some exterior sound effects. While handling noise is really not too bad, the same cannot be said for susceptibility to moving air. Small capsule mics always have problems with this but the ones fitted to the PMD620 seem especially sensitive. Even minor air disturbance, from breathing for example, has the diaphragms hitting the end stops. Marantz strongly recommends using an external condenser mic and I can see why. If you do use the external mic input, 5V power is available via a Preset menu switch. To aid mic level matching, an attenuator can be switched on at -12dB or -24dB.

Rudimentary non-destructive editing is present in the shape of Copy Segment. With an In and Out marker set by pressing the Record button while playing back, the section in between can be copied to a new file. This is more than sufficient for this type of device.

This machine has the best ergonomics of any I've tried so far in this size. The mic amps are subjectively quiet but this is offset by the internal mics sensitivity to air movement. If you intend to use an external mic this obviously won't be a problem. Otherwise this is one of the nicest of the breed.

PROS Good ergonomics; subjectively quiet; standard AA batteries, alkaline or NiMH.

CONS Internal mics over-susceptible to air movement; SD card cover a bit flimsy as are the USB and Ext Power covers.

Contact
MARANTZ, JAPAN:
Website: www.dmpro-eu.com

All sides

On the front panel, two small LEDs above the OLED display, Level and Over, indicate signal presence and clipping. Signal presence trigger level can be set at -54dB, -38dB, -20dB, -12dB or -6dB. Immediately below the screen are round Stop/cancel, Record Pause and the Record button. This has an annular ring that lights up softly in red when recording. Somehow this is much more satisfactory than a simple LED, more positive yet discreet. For ultimate discretion, all the LEDs can be turned off in the Presets Menu.

The large round cluster on the left is the control centre. Left/ |<<, right/ |>>, up/Vol+ and down/Vol- areas are where you would expect on the outer ring with a Play/Pause/Enter button in the middle. Display Menu/Store and Skip Back buttons complete the picture.

The rest of the layout is much as you would expect. A pair of mics at the top with Headphone and Mic sockets in between. Further jacks for Line In and Line Out, a remote jack and external power In (behind a rubber flap), are on the left-hand side. On the base another flap covers the mini USB port and next to this is a rather flimsy drop-down cover for the SD card slot. If this is open, recording stops and a message appears in the display. Power, Key Lock and Record level increment/decrement buttons are to be found on the right. Power is a spring biased slider that needs holding for a second or so to switch on but gives instant off. Key lock is a programmable slide switch with the options of locking everything or a partial lock which allows access to Record, Record Pause and Stop/Cancel.

On the back the batteries can be accessed via a plastic cover. Pressing the Display button steps through the operational screens: Time and Date, Current Record Setup and Total Time Remaining. When in Record Pause or Record a further screen shows Record level and whether Automatic Level Control is engaged. The meters are absolutely excellent with clear legends and good ballistics. Record formats are 16-bit or 24-bit linear PCM at 44.1 or 48 and three flavours of MP3.

The PMD can be set to skip silence when recording with threshold settings of -60dB, -54dB, -38dB or -20dB. Useful, I dare say, for surveillance purposes. Low cut is either on or off.

All significant settings are stored in Preset memories of which there are three in the machine. By default the first two are set up for MP3-M and MP3-H 44.1kHz and the third for PCM-24 bit 48kHz. All three can be user modified and there is a global restore to default. Presets can also be stored on SD cards and this will be of great benefit to organisations with a lot of machines to set up. You can change the font size for such things as the list screens from within the Preset menus. This doesn't affect the Preset lists, which really are a bit on the small side (had me reaching for stronger glasses), until you exit the menus and re-enter them again.

Manual Track starts a new file for the current recording when the Record button is pressed during recording; Auto Track starts a new audio file at specified intervals. Interval can be set to 1, 5, 10, 15 or 30 minutes or 1, 2, 6, 8, 12 or 24 hours. Auto track can be helpful for finding a specific point in the recording quickly. Recorded files may be sorted by date and time or alphabetically for display and the maximum number of files per card is 999.